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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate whether readers of newspapers that carry large amounts of crime news have a greater fear of being victims of crime than do readers of newspapers that place less emphasis on crime coverage. Data were gathered through a content analysis of crime news in three newspapers of widely differing circulation, interviews with panels of voters in three cities of differing sizes, and the Uniform Crime Reports published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for each city. The findings revealed that fear of crime was associated more strongly with newspaper emphasis on violent crime than with the actual frequency of violent crime in a community. In addition, the evidence suggested that both newspaper emphasis on crime and people's fear of crime were correlated more closely with the occurrence of violent crimes than with the occurrence of crimes in general in a community. (Author/FL)

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Reporting Crime and Fearing Crime in Three Communities

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> News of crime and vice should be printed. It is not only proper to print such news, but it is a public duty to print it. Crime and vice constitute problems with which society must constantly deal. And if it is to deal with them with any degree of effectiveness it must have knowledge of them, or their nature, extent, and the force and influences behind them (15).

> Today, the newspaper and the magazine remain valuable instruments for awakening popular response to narcotics, poverty, slums, prostitution, delinquency, and other ills that all too easily take refuge behind public lethargy or official incompetence . . . In journalism, the primary intent, however, is that of shocking or shaming the public into awareness of violations of the legal or moral order. Exposure is the overriding aim; all else--whether understanding, prevention, cure, or punishment--is secondary. The method is consequently impressionistic and rarely dispassionate. (11, p. 14-15).

Taken together, these quotations summarize the journalistic dilemma in reporting criminal activity. The first, from an early journalism textbook, begins with the idealistic assumption that the public will respond to problems in the social order when its attention is called to them. A role of the press in this traditional view is to provide an objective portrayal of reality to ensure that members of society might form an accurate assessment of the problem. That media effects might be positive in nature also is assumed here. The second, from a standard text on contemporary social problems, takes a less sanguine view. While conceding that the news

media can assume useful information roles, its author observes that less constructive outcomes result because press treatment of social problems is insufficient at an analytical level. Newsroom values that color the selection and presentation of information for public consumption are not objective in nature, and this precludes the possibility of systematic public understanding of the problem in question. The public must determine the nature of reality in some other way.

This paper considers the portrayal of one such problem--crime--in three daily newspapers. It poses the question of whether media pictures of criminal activity might be associated with public fears of victimization. Specifically, do readers of newspapers that carry large amounts of crime news have a greater fear of being victims of crimes than readers of newspapers that place less emphasis upon crime coverage? In considering this question, it draws upon content analyses of crime news in three newspapers of widely different circulations, interviews with a panel of voters in three cities of different sizes, and the Uniform Crime Reports for each city published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. [1]

Related Studies

Wilkins (14) observed that in urban cultures an individual's conceptions of normality and deviance are formed by information gained directly through personal experience and indirectly from institutional sources, such as the mass media. In spite of the expansion of formal sources of information in urban society, Wilkins regarded individuals as having suffered a net loss of information. This is because the growth of institutional arrangements that deal with (and usually isolate) 'deviant' members of society has reduced the possibility of first-hand, face-to-face communication

between the individual and society's 'deviants.' Wilkins' suggestion, therefore, is that information is a factor to be considered in explaining definitions of deviance and society's reactions to it: "If the information individuals receive about the workings and expectations of the system is biased, they will be robbed of reinforcement of their definitions of normality. . . The individual's store of information, which serves as the reference for individual definitions of normal and abnormal behaviour, is today easily derived from the mass media " (14, p. 63).

Notwithstanding the rising official counts of criminal activity in recent years, most people still have little first-hand contact with crime or criminals. Our questions, therefore, were related to the amount of bias or distortion that exists in the correspondence between official crime rates and press reports of it, and whether this distortion could be associated with newspaper readers' fears of becoming victims of crimes themselves.

Earlier studies of newspaper crime coverage have suggested that substantial discrepancies exist between official counts of criminal activity and press reports of crime. Roshier's study (12) of three English national newspapers and a large provincial paper found that relative to official crime statistics, the newspapers provided a distorted impression of the relative frequency of different types of crimes; this distortion tended in the direction of an over-representation in the press of more serious offenses. Davis (3) earlier had found that changes in the amount of crime news in four Colorado newspapers tended to vary independently of official crime trends in the state, both for total recorded crimes and selected types of criminal activity. More recently, Antunes and Hurley reported that only a small proportion (less than one percent) of crimes recorded by Houston police were reported by either of that city's two newspapers, and "the distribution

of crimes reported in the press is markedly dissimilar to the distribution of crimes known to the police" (1, pp. 756-60). Murder and rapes were reported far out of proportion to their frequency of occurrence, while property crimes (burglary, larceny, and auto theft) were under-reported substantially. Similar results were obtained by Jones in his study of crime coverage in St. Louis newspapers. Using 'attention scores' which weighted crime stories by their prominence in the newspapers, Jones found that the average crime against a person (murder, rape, aggravated assault, robbery) received about 35 times as much attention as a typical crime against property (10).

On their own, these findings are not surprising: traditional definitions of news place a greater emphasis upon occurrences that are unique, dramatic, unexpected and involve people directly--even though offenses against the person constitute less than a sixth of all crimes regarded as "serious" by the FBI (7). As the author of a reporting textbook describes the news values of criminal offenses:

> A crime involving persons of prominence, social position, or notoriety is bound to receive attention. Events in better sections of the city are likely to draw reporters to the scene. Spectacular murders, shootings, stabbings, fist fights, or suicides, large monetary losses in robberies or swindles involving property all fit into the Page 1 news patterns. . .
>
> The looting of small homes, the snatching of women's pocketbooks, the rumbles between gangs of juvenile delinquents and the small-time offenses of prostitution and gambling and the petty racketeering that flows from them are the commonplaces of crime in American life. Taken individually, they merit but a few lines, if anything at all, in the average paper and no mention at all in the broadcast media (8, pp. 399-400).

Because most people have little first-hand contact with criminal activity, it seems plausible to assume (with Wilkins) that their versions of reality are supplied at least in part by the news media. In this context, the tendency of the newspapers to exaggerate the frequency of serious crimes

and underplay relatively minor crimes would seem to acquire a special importance in forming public definitions of the "crime problem."

How do readers react to the presentation of criminal activity in the press? Though the evidence is unclear, indications are that they do not react as a prominent criminologist once suggested: "The effect of crime news is to throw the public into a panic" (13).

In one of the few studies that attempted to relate newspaper crime coverage, official statistics and public attitudes, Davis (3) found an association between public estimates of increases in violent crimes and the amount of crime news published. However, this relationship was not confirmed using other categories of criminal activity, and Davis regarded his findings as inconclusive. Roshier (12) found that public perceptions of criminal activity did not seem to be influenced by press distortions of the frequency of criminal activity. In fact, Roshier and an American research team which carried out another study comparing press coverage and public perceptions of social problems, both found that public estimates of the incidence of these phenomena were closer to official estimates than news media accounts (9).

Funkhouser's analysis of the coverage of major issues during the 1960s by three major newsmagazines found that the amount of media attention given to a specific issue strongly influenced the visibility of that issue to the public--but the amount of media attention did not seem to relate as closely to public attitudes on these issues or to the policy implications of these issues (4). Hubbard et al. concluded that "mass media emphasis does little to shape public opinion about relative incidence of established social problems," but they conceded that the news media may play a significant role when the social problem in question was beginning to emerge in the public conscious-

ness (9, p. 31).

None of these studies, however, compared newspaper readers in different communities regarding the differential effects of crime news coverage in their own communities. Also, for the most part these surveys compared readers' estimates of the incidence of specific phenomena with the amount of news coverage that phenomena received in the press; none compared readers' fears of being victimized with the crime news available to them in their local newspapers.

Method

In an effort to trace changes in concern over issues, media use patterns, perceptions of crime and other public reactions during the 1976 presidential campaign, a panel of about 45 registered voters in each of three diverse communities was recruited in January, 1976. These panels were purposively chosen from larger random samples of registered voters according to level of political interest and use of newspapers and television for political information.

The panel members were interviewed in February, March, May, July, August, September, October and November of 1976, and again in January, 1977: a total of nine interviews. All of the interviews except the July wave were conducted by telephone. July interviews were done face-to-face to permit reactions to various scales. Interviewers attempted to gain unusual rapport with the panel members to facilitate the gathering of unanticipated reactions to the campaign.

These interviews were conducted with voters in Evanston, Illinois, a suburban Chicago community; metropolitan Indianapolis, Indiana; and Lebanon,

New Hampshire, a small New England town. The probability samples from which panel members were recruited were designed to over-represent those in the three communities who usually followed political campaigns either in their newspapers or on television.[2]

The median age of panel members was in the 30s. About 40% were college graduates, and about half of those working outside the home had jobs traditionally classified as white collar. And 47% of the panel members were female.

The data from respondents in the three communities were supplemented by content analyses of the leading Indianapolis newspaper (the Star), a major Chicago paper (the Tribune), and the Lebanon daily newspaper (the Valley News) for the entire year of 1976. In addition to date, page location, size of story and other descriptive variables, each newspaper article was coded into one, two, or three of 73 subject matter categories and into one, two, or three of 65 issue categories.[3]

To obtain data on panel members' fear of crime, we asked the following questions in the August wave of interviews (August 22-25, 1976):

"Are you personally concerned about becoming a victim of crime?" _____Yes _____No _____Don't know

(IF "YES") "Are you very concerned, moderately concerned, or slightly concerned?"

Because these specific questions were asked only in the August interviews, we could not trace trends in concern over time. Newspaper content data on crime coverage was analyzed only from January 1 through August 21, 1976, because the August interviews began on August 22nd.

Findings

The three communities included in this study differed considerably in population and actual numbers of recorded crimes in 1976, as Table 1 indicates. Because of the substantial differences in the size of these communities and the size of their newspapers, it was not possible to compare numbers of crimes or numbers of newspaper stories about crimes directly. Instead, we standardized these measures by dividing the number of recorded crimes by the population size to obtain a measure of crimes per person. We also looked at the percentage of all newspaper stories about crime, rather than just the raw numbers of stories, to control for differences in the size of the newspapers.

Table 1 About Here

The standardized measures of community crime, newspaper coverage of crime, and respondents' fear of crime are presented in Table 2, with rankings for each community (1 = highest; 3 = lowest).

Looking at the first three columns of Table 2, it is apparent that although Evanston had the highest per capita overall crime rate and the highest per capita property crime rate, Indianapolis was first in violent crimes per person. As expected, the relatively small city of Lebanon had fewer overall, property and violent crimes per person than the other two communities.

Table 2 About Here

The next two columns containing the percentage of newspaper stories about crime in general and about violent crime in particular, indicate that the amount of newspaper crime coverage in each community was correlated more

closely with the number of violent crimes per person occurring in that community than with the number of overall crimes or the number of property crimes per person. (See columns 1 - 5 of Table 2)

This finding of a positive association between amount of violent crime and amount of crime coverage is consistent with the findings of earlier studies by Jones (10) and Antunes and Hurley (1). Both these studies found that the more serious but infrequent violent crimes, such as murder and rape, were emphasized in St. Louis and Houston newspapers whereas the far more numerous burglaries and thefts were not reported in proportion to their numbers, even though they were the ones people were most likely to encounter in their daily lives.

Although these studies imply that public opinion regarding the occurrence of crimes will be influenced by the newspaper emphasis on the infrequent but most serious ones, neither study includes public opinion survey data to test this assumption.

Columns 6 - 8 of Table 2 do contain such survey data from the panel members in our study. The rankings of concern over crime in these columns are identical to the rankings of newspaper emphasis on crime and to the number of violent crimes per person in the three communities (columns 2, 4 and 5), suggesting that both fear of crime and newspaper coverage of crime may be more a consequence of the frequency of violent crime in a community than of the overall frequency of all kinds of crime--not a surprising finding in itself, given traditional definitions of news.

But the percentages in columns 4 through 8 also indicate that level of fear of crime is associated more strongly with newspaper emphasis on violent crime than with the actual frequency of violent crime in a community.

Although the frequency of occurrence of recorded violent crime per

person in Indianapolis is 150% of what it is in Evanston (column 2), the percentage of newspaper stories about violent crime in the Indianapolis Star is nearly twice as great as in the Chicago Tribune (the newspaper most often read by the panel members in Evanston). And the percentages of readers of those two newspapers "very concerned" about becoming a crime victim reflect these differences in emphasis (column 8). More than twice as many Star readers in Indianapolis were "very concerned" about becoming a crime victim (63.6%) as were Tribune readers in Evanston (26.1%). But among all respondents in the two communities, the difference in the "very concerned" column was much closer to the 150% difference in occurrence of recorded violent crimes (columns 2 and 7).

In short, Table 2 presents evidence which suggests that both newspaper emphasis on crime and people's fear of crime are correlated more closely with the occurrence of violent crimes than with the occurrence of crimes in general in a community. And people's fear of crime seems to be associated more closely with newspaper emphasis on violent crime than with the actual frequency of occurrence of such crime as measured by the FBI Uniform Crime Reports.

These findings are consistent with those of the Colorado study by Davis (3). He found that the more attention four Colorado newspapers devoted to violent crime, the more a sample of 435 state residents tended to think such crime was increasing, even though the actual recorded violent crime occurrence was declining.

Conclusions

Public concern over crime in America has been evident in public opinion surveys since the 1960s, when official crime indicators began a steep rise and "crime in the streets" took on political as well as social implications. In a

Gallup poll conducted in June 1975, Americans rated crime ahead of unemployment and inflation as the "most important problem" in their communities (5). And while there is evidence that public concern over the crime problem has levelled off more recently, 45 percent of respondents in a 1978 Gallup poll said they would be "afraid to walk alone at night" in certain areas a mile away from their homes--up from 31 percent in 1968 (6).

The findings of the present and some of the previous studies suggest that newspaper emphasis upon relatively infrequent violent crimes may contribute to a fear of violent criminal attack in some communities. The less frequent coverage of the more numerous property crimes by newspapers in these communities may lead correspondingly to an unrealistically low concern with the kinds of crime that most citizens are most likely to encounter.

These conclusions must be considered as suggestive--rather than as more definitive--statements, however, for a number of reasons. One is the obvious limitation of the three particular communities included in this study, which may or may not be "typical" of other American communities of similar and different sizes and composition. In these communities, only small numbers of persons (about 45) were surveyed. Also, the "elite" nature of the sample populations in each community (see footnote 2) makes generalization to the entire population of each community more problematic than it would be with a more conventional random sample. Nevertheless, the difference in percentages between those newspaper readers "very concerned" about becoming crime victims in Indianapolis and Evanston exceeds the plus or minus 14 percent sampling error for a random sample of 45 persons, and the "elite" nature of the samples actually may serve to underestimate the relationship that might be found in the general population (see footnote 2). Finally, the news media messages considered in this study were restricted to those published in the newspapers available to these readers; broadcast reports of crime in these communities were not analyzed.

But the suggestion of these findings is that on a relative level (considering only these three cities and the differences between them), there was a relationship between the attention a newspaper afforded violent crime in the community and the fears of its readers of being victimized themselves. The Indianapolis Star, in which 10.1 percent of newspaper stories were about violent crime, circulates in a community in which nearly two-thirds of readers regarded themselves as "very concerned" about becoming a crime victim. In the smaller and less urbanized community of Lebanon, N.H., where in Wilkins' terms individuals would have greater opportunities to determine for themselves the degree of risk they face from criminal activity, only one in seven persons was very concerned about becoming a crime victim.

These findings should not be construed as suggesting that the dilemma of crime reporting described at the beginning of this paper might be resolved simply by not reporting crime news. But they raise questions about the methods and presentation used by these newspapers in reporting local criminal activity, and specifically whether crime news is reported dispassionately and with the sense of context needed to provide readers with a meaningful understanding of this behavior and its policy implications--or whether it is used to shock, to shame, or titillate the readers.

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Notes

[1]There are special problems, of course, in using Uniform Crime Reports as a representation of objective reality in social research, and in particular, making inter-city comparisons of this data (for concise descriptions of some of these problems see Donald R. Cressey, 'Crime,' in Merton and Nisbet, op. cit., pp. 140-145, and Keith D. Harries, The Geography of Crime and Justice, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1974, pp. 2-6. The reservations expressed in these works apply to the present study as well. On the other hand, the emphasis herein is not upon inter-city comparisons, but upon the amount of crime reported in each newspaper relative to the amount reported by local police officials to the FBI. As a newspaper's reporters would be likely to obtain most--if not all--of their crime news from local police records, it would seem that intra-city--and not inter-city--comparisons lie at the heart of the present study.

[2]Those voters not using newspapers or television for political information were eliminated from the panel because we reasoned that they could not be directly affected by political messages from these media. This procedure of limiting the sample to randomly selected registered voters who used newspapers and/or television for political information produced a sort of "elite" sample of more politically conscious, higher socio-economic status respondents than would have been obtained using conventional random sampling procedures. We argue that such persons would be less likely to be susceptible to media emphasis on crime in forming judgments about the likelihood of being victimized than would less politically conscious, lower socioeconomic status persons. If so, the findings of this study may be understated if applied to a more general population. That is, the relationships we find in this study may be stronger for a general population than for the more elite population represented by our sample.

[3]This coding was carried out by graduate students who were trained for several weeks in the use of this system of categories. The individual newspaper story was the unit of analysis, and each story was coded into at least one subject matter and one issue category. Additional categories (up to a total of three) were used if coders decided that a given story equally emphasized more than one issue or was about more than one subject. The data reported in this article are based only on the first-coded issue category (crime) or the first-coded subject matter category (individual crime). The "crime" issue category included newspaper stories dealing with any kind of crime--violent or property--or with the topic of crime as a social problem. The "individual crime" subject matter category included mainly violent crime such as murder, robbery, rape, arson and bombings.

Table 1

Recorded Crimes and Populations of
Three Different Communities in 1975-76

Communities	Overall Crimes	Violent Crimes	Property Crimes	Population
1. Evanston, Ill.	5,074[a]	336[b]	4,738[c]	76,665[d]
2. Indianapolis, Ind.	38,972	4,145	34,827	714,878
3. Lebanon, N.H.	302	5	297	11,300

[a]Overall crimes, as reported in the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, include both violent crimes (criminal homicide, forcible rape, robberty, and aggravated assault) and property crimes (burglary, larceny, theft, and motor vehicle theft). The crime figures reported here come from Crime in the United States--1976 Uniform Crime Reports (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice). All figures are for the entire year of 1976.

[b]Violent crimes include criminal homicide (murder and non-negligent manslaughter, and manslaughter by negligence), forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Same source as footnote a.

[c]Property crimes include burglary (breaking or entering), larceny, theft, and motor vehicle theft. Same source as footnote a.

[d]The population figures for Indianapolis and Evanston are 1975 estimates (the closest to 1976 we could find) from Current Population Reports, Population Estimates and Projections (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Series P-25, numbers 661 and 662, May 1977). The population figures for Lebanon, N.H., are for 1976 and came from 1976 New Hampshire Resident Population Figures (Concord, N.H.: New Hampshire Office of Comprehensive Planning).

Table 2

A Comparison of Recorded Crimes, Newspaper Coverage of Crime, And People's Fear of Crime in Three Different Communities in 1976

Communities	Recorded Crimes (1) Overall Crimes Per Capita	(rank)	(2) Violent Crimes Per Capita	(rank)	(3) Property Crimes Per Capita	(rank)	Newspaper Coverage of Crime (4) % of newspaper stories about crime	(rank)	(5) % of newspaper stories on violent crime	(rank)
1. Evanston, Ill. (Chicago Tribune)	.07[a]	1	.004[b]	2	.06[c]	1	12.1%[d]	2	5.3%[e]	2
2. Indianapolis, Ind. (Indianapolis Star)	.05	2	.006	1	.05	2	14.5%	1	10.1%	1
3. Lebanon, N.H. (Valley News)	.03	3	.000	3	.03	3	6.7%	3	.4%	3

Communities (continued)	People's Fear of Crime (6) % of all respondents at all concerned about becoming a crime victim (n = 133)	(rank)	(7) % of all respondents "very concerned" about becoming a crime victim (n = 63)	(rank)	(8) % of newspaper readers "very concerned" about becoming a crime victim (n = 48)	(rank)
1. Evanston, Ill. (Chicago Tribune)	46.7%[f]	2	28.6%[g]	2	26.1%[h]	2
2. Indianapolis, Ind. (Indianapolis Star)	60.0%	1	42.9%	1	63.6%	1
3. Lebanon, N.H. (Valley News)	35.9%	3	14.3%	3	14.3%	3

[a]This figure, which indicates that there was about one crime for each 14 persons in Evanston in 1976, was calculated by dividing the total number of crimes recorded for 1976 (5,074) by the 1975 population estimate (76,665). The crime figures come from Crime in the United States--1976 Uniform Crime Reports (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice), and the 1975 population estimates for Indianapolis and Evanston come from Current Population Reports, Population Estimates

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

and Projections (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Series P-25, number 662, May 1977). The 1976 Lebanon population figures came from 1976 New Hampshire Resident Population Figures (Concord, N.H.: New Hampshire Office of Comprehensive Planning).

[b]Same procedures and sources as in footnote a. "Violent" crimes include criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Indicates about one violent crime for every 250 persons in Evanston in 1976.

[c]Same procedures and sources as in footnote a. "Property" crimes include burglary, larceny, theft, and motor vehicle theft. Indicates about one property crime for every 17 persons in Evanston in 1976.

[d]Based on a total of 13,587 stories of three column inches or longer from the Chicago Tribune, January 1 through August 21, 1976. Coders were trained and supervised by Professor Doris Graber, Department of Political Science, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. The Indianapolis Star percentage is based on a total of 2,957 stories of three column inches or longer from every fourth issue (starting point randomly chosen), January 1 through August 21, 1976. The Valley News percentage is based on a total of 3,489 stories three inches or longer from every issue, January 1 through August 21, 1976. Coders for the Indianapolis Star were supervised and trained by Professor David Weaver, School of Journalism, Indiana University. Coders for the Valley News were trained and supervised by Professor Maxwell McCombs, School of Public Communications, Syracuse University. Only stories from the first of the year through August 21st were included in this analysis because the August survey interviews began on August 22nd.

[e]See footnote d.

[f]In the August wave of interviews, respondents were asked: "Are you personally concerned about becoming a victim of crime?" The 43% who said "yes" were then asked, "Are you very concerned, moderately concerned or slightly concerned?" These percentages were then crosstabulated with community of residence and specific newspaper read. The percentages listed in column 6 represent the proportions of all respondents in the three communities (regardless of newspaper read) who said "yes" when asked if they were personally concerned about becoming a victim of crime.

[g]Same procedures as described in footnote f, except that these percentages represent the proportions of all respondents in the three communities who said they were "very concerned" about becoming a victim of crime.

[h]Same procedures as decribed in footnote f, except that these percentages represent the proportions of newspaper readers only who said they were "very concerned" about becoming a victim of crime.